

So you want to be a leader?

Alison O'Hara discusses the three simple principles that set her on a course to successful leadership



I had just begun to think about the kind of organisational leader I would like to become when I heard Anthony Sargent, General Director of The Sage Gateshead, speak to MA Cultural Management students at Northumbria University. This was years ago, but Anthony's three axioms for authority have stayed with me, and have remained a constant source of motivation and encouragement as I've faced the myriad challenges involved in developing my career in the arts.

Since I became Chief Executive of Audiences North East (ANE), I've come into regular contact with Anthony, as he has been a highly active and long-standing trustee of the organisation. I've seen first-hand how he applies his management style, which he's developed throughout an illustrious arts management career with the BBC, Southbank Centre and Birmingham City Council before taking the helm at The Sage Gateshead, the North East's iconic flagship music venue.

Anthony's three keys to successful leadership are based on trust, courage and attention to detail.

It's the simplicity and common sense of the principles that have stayed with me – it's amazing how they underpin pretty much everything to do with organisational management, making them easy to remember and apply.

Being able to create trust – among staff, stakeholders and customers – is what marketers call 'branding', and is both the simplest and most difficult

thing to achieve as a leader. It hinges on honesty and transparency, consistency and integrity – it's something that has to be earned and cannot be bought. Anthony says that 'ultimately it all comes down to respect. Relationships (whoever they are with – staff, customers, clients, the wider public) which aren't grounded in a sense of respect for the other person and their point of view can never be as fruitful and (professionally) successful as those which are; it really is as simple as that.'

I have found this to be true particularly in relation to activities that involve some kind of risk. The audience development projects that we have delivered in partnership with cultural venues, such as *Maximise* (developing and 'mainstreaming' audiences for BME arts) and *Family Friendly*, were potentially laden with risk, and required a great deal of trust on both sides to generate positive outcomes. I also see this principle at work on a micro level when organisations use the trust they have created with their audiences in order to move them into riskier purchasing behaviour. Internally, it's simply difficult to imagine how I could manage the team at ANE without their trust – it would be like trying to bake a cake without eggs!

At some point, all leaders will encounter challenges that require a stiffening of the spine, and having the courage to take tough decisions is a crucial skill for any leader. As

the head of a large and complex organisation, Anthony has faced his share of tough decisions – decisions that impact on hundreds of staff and many thousands of audience members. But I don't believe they're necessarily any easier to make for leaders of smaller organisations – our actions have equally profound effects and deserve equal measures of respect and acknowledgement. Since being appointed as CEO of Audiences North East, business-critical decisions over our subscription scheme, organisational structure and the direction of our digital marketing services, including whatsonnortheast.com, have all had to be made. It's a scary place to be, and it's often a very lonely place, but it's what makes being a leader so exciting.

Anthony's final piece of advice was to take the trouble to be aware of the little things. This is not about micro-management, but about retaining the attention to detail that creates superb customer experiences – those special experiences that go beyond expectations. It's a constant endeavour to create (and measure) smiles. Anthony regularly attends shows at The Sage Gateshead, and responds personally to customer comments, making it his business to understand the total visitor experience. My commitment to this principle has paid dividends over the years. I try to be as knowledgeable about our clients as possible, and recently startled a museum manager by congratulating him on the recent

upsurge in visitor figures I had noticed from working on an audience development project with his team. The conversation, sparked by a small but significant detail, cemented a previously rather casual relationship into something more enduring and, potentially, rewarding.

Trust, courage and attention to detail – three guiding principles that never fail to inspire and invigorate me to be the best I can be as a leader. ●

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